

## THE RIDGES OF HAIDA GWAI

### Proposal for a one-hour documentary

This is a film about a story trying to become part of our cultural baggage. It is a legend trying to become history. It has remained obscure because it does not fit in to our established ideology, according to which this continent was the exclusive domain of the North American Indian before the arrival of the Vikings in the ninth century and of other Europeans in the sixteenth. The story is about Hui Shen, a Buddhist monk from Afghanistan who travelled in North America a thousand years before Columbus. The film is about four men who believe the monk may have spent some time on the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia. Those islands are the home of the Haida Indians. They call it Haida Gwaii.

### *The Story*

Afghanistan was ransacked by the White Huns in the fifth century. Buddhist monks were massacred and their works destroyed.

Five young Afghan monks fled Kabul together and headed for China. They were led by Hui Shen, whose name meant "universal compassion". They learned about all the latest advances in Chinese science, technology and philosophy. Then they decided that the time had come for them to spread their knowledge and their Buddhist faith to other lands.

The Chinese by that time had developed the magnetic compass, and the raft with fore and aft lug-sails. Together with their knowledge of astronomy and navigation, these inventions made it possible for the Chinese to travel long distances on the open sea. By the fifth century, they had been crossing the "Eastern Ocean" for hundreds of years, following the warm Kuroshio and North Pacific currents to North America. The west coast of North America was well known by Chinese merchants, marine hunters and servants of the Emperor looking for the "drug of everlasting life".

Hui Shen and his four friends landed on the coast of California in 458 A.D. They crossed the Coastal Range to Arizona, where they became acquainted with the Mogollon Indians, but they spent most of the next 40 years in Mexico. They found the civilizations of Teotihuacan and Yucatan already inundated with the signs of Chinese culture: the horizontal design and stepped platforms of palaces and tombs, the cremation of the dead, the use of conch-shells as trumpets, of bark-cloth fibre technology to make paper, of ying-yang and lotus motifs in art, of dresses made with feathers, of wheeled toys.

But Hui Shen and his followers added more. By the time he left Mexico, the Mayans had adopted new methods of agriculture, metallurgy, weaving and ceramics. They had begun building the great new cities of Palenque and Chichen Itza, decorated with sculpted images of the sun, the tree and the serpent, which were the sacred symbols of Buddha. Mexico was at the height of what is called its Classic Period or its Golden Age.

Hui Shen returned to China in 499, this time riding the Alaska current up the coast of B.C., and following the chain of islands that rim the North Pacific. He told his story to the Emperor in his court at Chiangchou. It was reproduced in the "History of the Liang Dynasty" which was compiled by court historians a century later. It was not known in the Occident until Jesuit missionaries to China translated the History of the Liang Dynasty in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. French, German and English academia re-worked their understanding of the history of North America. But it was largely ignored in North America until a Chicago patent attorney called Henriette Mertz, an ardent student of Mexican history, published a book in 1953 entitled "Pale Ink".

Mertz rattled the academic establishment by listing towns in the American southwest and in Mexico whose names could have been derived from Hui Shen, Pi-k'iu (the Chinese word for mendicant priest), and Saka (Buddha's family clan). She pointed out that those towns are in a direct line that a traveller could follow from the coast of California to Yucatan, and that Hui Shen's descriptions of terrain and customs could match precise locations and indigenous groups along that route. She argued that Hui Shen must have been the shaman whom the Mayas named Kukulcan: the bearded, pale-skinned stranger who appeared from the west and taught men how to measure time and distance, how to make metal out of ores, to polish jade, to make mosaics from parrot and quetzal feathers, and to live in a kindly way, without cruelty and war--the extraordinary man who disappeared in the direction from which he came, promising to return. When the Mayans were superceded by the Toltecs in the eighth century, Kukulcan evolved into the most loved and famous of all Mexican deities: Quetzalcoatl, the god of life, of morning, of wind, depicted in the sculpture of Toltec architecture as the plumed serpent.

Mertz's work was given some credibility when the distinguished British bio-chemist and sinologist Joseph Needham began publishing his seven-volume "Science and Civilization in China" in 1954. Volume 4 revealed how profoundly the golden age of Mayan culture in the fourth and fifth centuries was influenced by Chinese art and technology.

Journalists and poets started taking notice. One of them was Gary Geddes, the distinguished B.C. poet who grew up in the east end of Vancouver, where 40% of the population was Chinese. In his anthology of west coast writing published in 1975, Geddes included a piece by Harold Griffin pointing out that in his report to the Emperor, Hui Shen had described certain trees and fish that were peculiar to the north-west coast, and that therefore he probably spent some time in B.C.

Geddes toured China twice in the eighties as a guest of the Chinese Writers Association, and published two books of poetry inspired by those trips: "Chinada", and "The Terracotta Army". His curiosity about pre-Colombian contacts with China was intensified over the next decade by two rather sensational revelations.

The first was an article by the respected B.C. archeologist Grant Keddie, in which he claimed that marine hunters from north-east China had probably been working the north-west coast of North America for 2,000 years up to the fifth century A.D. Keddie's evidence was iron tools, cylindrical hats, and decorative lip plugs used by northwest coast Indians over that period--artifacts that were all found previously in the Amur region of China.

The second revelation was a broadcast on the BC Knowledge Network which showed a Chinese scholar exploring Haida Gwaii in search of ancient stone cairns which some Haida natives had heard their grand-parents say had been laid down by Buddhist monks. Bear-hunters had used them for centuries as guide-posts in foggy weather on the ridges to the west of Masset Inlet.

The Chinese scholar was Zhixiong He. He was doing graduate work in sociology at Simon Fraser University. He had learned of the Hui Shen legend in his home province of Yunnan, China, and heard of the ancient cairns from Haida elders he met in Haida Gwaii when he was there on a student project. He persuaded a handful of Haida Gwaii residents to hire a helicopter for a day to check out the story of the cairns on the ridges. They found nothing in such a short time, and agreed that the search would have to be done by camping and hiking on the ridges over a period of a week or two.

Geddes wanted in on the search for those cairns. He saw that search as a beautiful metaphor around which he could build a prose poem about one of the major themes of his work as a writer: the search for a common identity of Canadians of European, Asian and aboriginal descent. He got an advance from Harper-Canada for a book about the travels of Hui Shen. He met with Zhixiong He, and Zhixiong's two main collaborators in Haida Gwaii: Michael Nichol Yagulenaas, Haida artist and ecologist, and David Phillips, hotel owner and community activist. They laid out a plan for exploring the ridges west of Masset Inlet in the summer of 2002.

I propose a film about the legend of Hui Shen, structured around the search for his cairns on the ridges of Haida Gwaii.

### *Film Treatment*

The ridges connect the rugged west coast of northern Haida Gwaii with the settled interior around Masset Inlet. They rise above the tree line. They are covered with snow most of the year. In mid-June they are blanketed with moss, wild grass and sub-arctic flowers. Logging crews work the rain forest in the valleys below.

Four men are spread out over one of the ridges, obviously looking for something:

Gary Geddes is an experienced camper. His white hair establishes him as the oldest of the four. But he is a specimen of physical fitness.

Michael Nicholas Yagulenaas, in his forties, is a Haida artist well known for his opposition to clear-cut logging.

Ian Gould, in his thirties, is a white native of the island who is an accomplished hiker and photographer, but who earns his living as a logger.

Zhixiong He, also in his thirties, speaks broken English, but his enthusiasm is the group's driving force.

The four communicate through portable radios. From their radio exchanges, we get hints of what they are looking for.

We learn more when they return to camp and settle in for a long northern summer evening of cooking and conversation.

Over the 10 days they are together, through sun and rain, through discoveries and dead-ends, we learn about the life experiences, dreams and ambitions which have motivated them to come here.

We learn that Michael heard about the stone cairns from his great uncle, whose generation was the last to hunt for bear on the ridges. Michael talks while he sketches. He wants to do make animated films with his sketches. He has retired from the anti-logging movement to study Chinese calligraphy in Vancouver, but returns to Haida Gwaii in the summer to act as a guide at the historic site of Skungwaii, the ancient Haida village preserved by UNESCO.

We learn that Ian is one of the few living islanders who has been on these ridges before. He hiked here 10 years ago with his fiancée, on the eve of their marriage. She has since been ill with chronic fatigue syndrome, and Ian's photographs of the ridges have been

images of health and hope for her. It is Ian's connection with the logging industry that made it possible for the group to get here by helicopter.

We learn that Zhixiong is a member of a Buddhist ethnic minority in China called Naxi, that he was active in defending the rights of the Naxi in Yunnan province. He came to British Columbia to study the cooperative movement, and returned to China to write a book about Hui Shen studies in that country. It is possible that Hui Shen represents Zhixiong's hope that he can stay in North America with his wife Bao, who is taking a doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts.

We learn that Gary had been in Kabul, Afghanistan in August, 2001, starting his research on Hui Shen, and was following Hui Shen's route through what is now the Muslim area of western China when New York and Washington were hit on September 11. He has just spent another ten weeks following the route that Hui Shen may have taken through the American south-west and Mexico.

The story of Gary's travels becomes the main focus of the group's evening discussions, and gradually becomes the film's narration, as Gary's story is illustrated with excerpts from footage from the areas he has visited: Kabul, Shanghai, Phoenix, Palenque, Chichen Itza. His story will include his following of Hui Shen's probable route across the Pacific by hopping on a freighter from Shanghai to Los Angeles.

While listening to Gary's story, Michael does sketches in Chinese style about Hui Shen's travels. They can come to life in the form of animated sequences in post-production.

There is no way of guaranteeing that our four characters will find the stone cairns. But the high elevation, isolation, long days and stark beauty of the ridges will cause them to reflect about what Hui Shen stood for, and what message he might have for North America today.

At some point in their adventure, Gary may tell them of Peter Matthiessen's classic tale of the legendary snow leopard of Nepal--about how it dominates the animal kingdom and the human mythology of the Himalayas, and how it has never been seen by a European. It will be a moment of great excitement for our characters, of course, if they find evidence of the stone cairns on Haida Gwaii. But if they don't, Gary will put to them the question that Matthiessen put to himself when he was unable to find the snow leopard -- "we have been spared the desolation of success, the doubt: but is this really what we came so far to see?" Even if they find the cairns, the cairns may contain no clues of having been laid by Hui Shen 1500 years ago. But the four men might conclude that their time together on these ridges has shown that a sense of common identity can be enriched as much through shared legend as through the evidence of history.